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ABSTRACT

The responsibilities and functioning of an academic affairs committee of a college governing board are described. It is noted that the responsibilities of the academic affairs committee involve monitoring the relationship between mission and strategy in the academic realm. The following responsibilities of the committee are discussed: the educational program is consistent with institutional mission and strategy, the academic budget reflects academic priorities, faculty personnel policies and procedures are equitable and supportive of academic priorities, academic programs are appropriate to the institution's students, and the quality of academic activities is evaluated. The staffing and agenda for the committee and the committee's access to information are also considered. The specific issue of whether to appoint nonvoting faculty or student members to the committee is addressed, along with the role of the institution's chief academic officer, and typical agenda items. Eight reference documents are identified. (SW)

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Academic Affairs Committee

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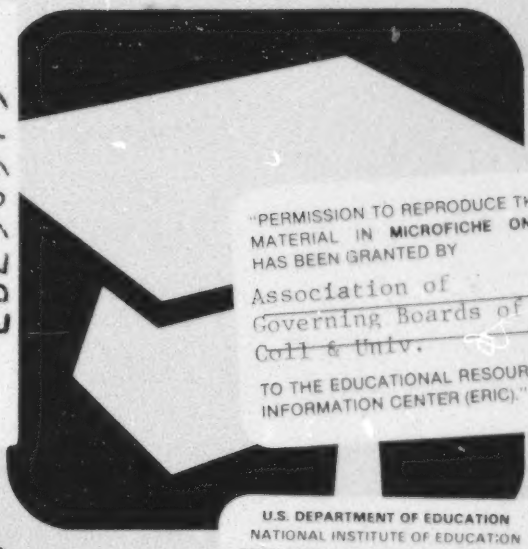

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AGB Standing Committee Series

This publication is part of a new AGB series devoted to strengthening the role of key standing committees of boards of trustees and regents. Several assumptions underpin the series:

- The real work of the boards should be accomplished in committee. An effective committee system will enhance the productivity of full board meetings.
- The committee structure of any board should mirror the full range of its responsibilities as a legal, corporate entity. That is, the committee organization should cover the oversight roles trustees are expected to fulfill.
- Although there is no optimum committee system, certain principles and procedural matters should prevail: A clear and comprehensive statement of responsibility for each standing committee should appear in the board's bylaws or other operating policy. Each committee should be staffed by an appropriate administrative officer with a trustee or regent as chairperson. No trustee should serve on more than two active committees, preferably one—not including an executive committee membership. Crisp, well-conceived meeting agendas together with background information bearing on the agenda should be provided each member in advance of scheduled meetings. The committee's chairperson and staff should work together to ensure that adequate information is prepared to support the business at hand.
- Committees have the responsibility of *recommending* decisions and courses of action to the full board.

As committee members seek more and more useful information in their areas of responsibility, it is important that a balance be struck between "too much" and "too little." It is incumbent on the committee, therefore, to be reasonable

and judicious in requesting information that may be too detailed in order to avoid even the appearance of becoming embroiled in administration. Perhaps all such requests should require an affirmative response to the question: Does this request contribute to the committee's and the board's responsibilities for reviewing, setting, or approving institutional policies?

The AGB Standing Committee Series will eventually include a separate publication for each of the following committees: buildings and grounds, budget and finance, development, student affairs, nominating, and executive. Other committees will be added to the series in due course. The authors of these publications strive to stimulate committee members' resolve that their collective work will reflect favorably on the board's performance as a whole. They share the conviction that committees should, together with their chief executive, set aside time to reflect on their responsibilities, staff requirements, meeting agendas, and follow-up.

AGB and the authors welcome comments and suggestions for improving this publication, and the others in the series, in future editions.

Academic Affairs Committee

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Committee Charge

The academic mission of a college or university defines the institution's principal purposes. For that reason, development and review of the academic mission should be among a governing board's foremost concerns. The academic affairs committee plays a pivotal role because it bears the responsibility for reviewing and recommending program and personnel policies integral to fulfilling the academic mission.

Oversight of academic mission requires that trustees participate in matters that rightfully concern faculty members and academic administrators. The sensitivity of the board's position is obvious. Because the definition and implementation of the academic mission are so consequential, trustees must attend to these matters. On the other hand, the board should not substitute its judgment for that of faculty and administrators more intimately involved with the institution's academic affairs.

A balanced approach will be marked by collaboration. The board should seek the counsel and cooperation of faculty and administrators on academic matters to ensure that the institution undertakes activities consistent with its goals. The key question for the academic affairs committee is not *whether* to participate but *how* to participate appropriately.

More specifically, the committee should ensure that:

1. *The educational program is consistent with institutional mission and strategy.*
2. *The academic budget reflects academic priorities.*
3. *Faculty personnel policies and procedures are equitable and supportive of academic priorities.*

4. *Academic programs are appropriate to the institution's students.*
5. *The quality of academic activities is evaluated.*

Structure

Above all else, members of the academic affairs committee should be interested in the institution's academic mission. The workload will be demanding, and committee members should be prepared to spend a considerable amount of time absorbing background information underlying policy recommendations. The committee chairperson ideally should be a trustee experienced in educational matters and with an appreciation of the singular nature of the educational enterprise.

The committee should be sensitive to, but not paralyzed by, higher education's collegial traditions. Academic institutions tend to diffuse power. Many managerial decisions are made at the department, school, or college level. And in the spirit of "shared governance" many institutional decisions are made in conjunction with faculty. Therefore, open communication between the committee and its constituents, notably the faculty, is crucial.

To facilitate communication the board may choose to appoint nonvoting faculty or student members to the committee. This decision must weigh the institutional benefits of a broadly representative committee against the disadvantage of considering sensitive matters of academic policy in the presence of potentially partisan constituents. Generally, the advantages of constituent representation far exceed the disadvantages. However, committee members should not assume that the views of student and faculty representatives reflect the sentiment of all their peers.

The academic affairs committee normally should be staffed by the institution's chief academic officer. The committee should rely on this individual to inform and enlighten its decisions to establish collaborative mechanisms with the faculty. A strong relationship with the faculty leadership through the chief academic officer also helps ensure that the committee receives faculty opinion, though not to the exclusion of administrative comment and advice. Trustee/faculty collaboration that precludes administrative influence is not likely to benefit the institution.

Agenda

The academic affairs committee should shape and control its own agenda. Suggestions from the chief academic officer, other administrators, and faculty leaders are useful, but ultimately the committee—under the board's aegis—must chart its own course.

It is all too easy for the committee to become mired in trivial, repetitive agendas, routinely receiving reports and recommendations that fail to confront critical issues squarely. Listening to

faculty presentations of arcane research results and discussing proposals to rename a program or add a course are hardly the best use of trustee time and talent. The committee should require reports on important issues that present both the strengths and the weaknesses of the case and some discussion of the acceptable alternatives discarded as well as the position recommended.

Committee agendas should reflect institutional circumstances. Clearly, agendas cannot be last-minute, back-of-the-envelope affairs. To the extent possible, the committee should establish annually a list of major agenda items. In that way, the committee will be required to focus on critical agenda choices, and the administration and faculty will have ample time to gather the information that should precede consideration. Over a three- to five-year period, the committee might discuss and act upon issues such as:

- *criteria for promotion and tenure*
- *a faculty development program*
- *addition, deletion, or reduction of academic programs*
- *compensation policies*
- *faculty and staff evaluation procedures*
- *admissions criteria*
- *graduation requirements.*

These are substantive agenda items, appropriate for board consideration after faculty and staff have formulated and recommended policies and procedures.

Responsibilities

Vague, global mission statements will not do. The institution should be guided by, or at least be working toward, a widely shared sense of purpose. Ultimately the governing board must determine the institution's mission, and the various

organizational elements—including the academic affairs committee—should develop goals and objectives consistent with that statement of purpose. Only then can strategies be devised to reconcile the institution's mission with environmental constraints and opportunities.

The trustees' role is not to create these strategies. The president, in concert with senior administrators and faculty leaders, should fulfill this responsibility. The board should require the development of strategies, ask incisive questions, and when appropriate, accept or reject the broad sweep—not the details—of strategic plans.

The responsibilities of the academic affairs committee involve monitoring the relationship between mission and strategy in the academic realm.

Responsibility #1: Ensure that the educational program is consistent with both institutional mission and strategies.

In the past, as students' academic interests changed, many colleges and universities added new programs, typically without a commensurate reduction of other programs. Growth sometimes seemed unrelated to a coherent academic philosophy and plan. Program reviews can sharpen an institution's academic focus and differentiate between weak and strong components of the curriculum. Culling marginal or unnecessary programs is not easy. Faculty, students, and alumni have economic, philosophical, and sentimental ties to curricula. Tampering with academic programs agitates their supporters.

Despite the potential discomfort, the academic affairs committee should question administrators about program priorities.

- *Which programs best support the institution's missions and strategies?*
- *Which programs are central? Which are peripheral?*
- *What are the revenue and enrollment trends in each program?*
- *Which programs are likely to grow? Which are likely to decline?*
- *Which programs are vital to the institution's mission?*
- *How are we preparing for anticipated changes in the environment?*
- *What are our competitive advantages and disadvantages?*

The academic affairs committee must pose these questions to faculty and administrators, then assess the answers. All the while, the institution's mission and strategies should guide program decisions. If it appears that adjustments must be made—programs phased out, faculty released—it is far better to plan for change than wait for a financial crisis to force hurried actions that all too often damage faculty careers and institutional integrity.

Responsibility #2: Ensure that the academic budget reflects the institution's academic priorities.

The budget is the fundamental instrument for realizing academic priorities. Unfortunately, academic budgets and academic priorities are frequently formulated in isolation. In such cases, institutions typically increase or decrease each department's budget by some modest increment. When substantial general revenue increases were commonplace, incremental budgeting was not destructive as long as the increments could support high-demand, high-quality programs. In a time of limited revenues, however, incremental budgeting is likely to maintain weak or declining programs at

the expense of more attractive areas of investment. Incremental budgeting makes the execution of an institution's academic strategy doubly difficult.

Resource reallocation is difficult at best. As with educational programs, academic budgets are proxies for people, particularly faculty. Because higher education is a labor-intensive enterprise, the shifting of resources often means that positions move from one program to another. When tenured faculty members occupy those positions, the problem becomes especially acute, accentuating the need for effective academic planning. The institution must project future revenues and expenditures as specifically as possible, and predict what threats and opportunities the environment will present.

Some academic affairs committees take little or no account of budgets, deferring instead to the finance committee. This practice parallels a common administrative error of separating academic and financial decisions. The academic affairs committee should open lines of communication and cooperation to the finance committee (and vice versa). At a minimum, each committee might appoint one of its members as liaison to the other. The chairpersons could meet regularly to discuss common committee interests. The committees might have occasional joint meetings, particularly as the academic budget for ensuing years is developed, to ensure that financial decisions reflect academic priorities.

The academic affairs committee's responsibility in academic budgeting, as in other areas, is to ensure that budgeting is done well. Administrators who prepare and present the budget might be asked such questions as:

- *What criteria determine resource allocations?*
- *How are faculty positions and other resources reallocated from low-growth/low-leadership to high-growth/high leadership programs?*
- *What is the magnitude of these shifts?*
- *What markets will be strong in the future, and what programs will respond to that demand?*
- *How do we know the best faculty earn the most money?*

Responsibility #3: Ensure that faculty personnel policies and procedures complement academic priorities.

Faculty personnel policies include those governing appointment, promotion, tenure, performance evaluation, sabbaticals, retirement, compensation, and retrenchment. These policies and procedures shape the character of the institution's primary academic resource—its faculty. Where promotion and tenure are routine if not automatic, and where compensation bears little relationship to performance, a far different faculty will develop than at a college or university that promotes and tenures selectively, and bases raises on performance.

In trying to ensure sound personnel decisions, trustees are sometimes tempted to review the professional qualifications of individual faculty members and second-guess the judgments of faculty peers and administrators. It is doubtful that most trustees are qualified to do this, and in any case it would be an inappropriate and intrusive activity for trustees.

The academic affairs committee would do better to question administrators about the strategic implications of personnel recommendations. For example, the committee should be

concerned with whether a tenure decision forecloses a more attractive opportunity next year or whether enrollments and finances warrant another tenure commitment in a particular field. Inquiries about retirement policy might concern anticipated departure rates over five or ten years and the costs and savings of alternative retirement plans. The complex interrelationships among promotion, performance evaluation, and compensation might be explored to determine whether or not rewards correspond to performance.

Responsibility #4: Ensure that the institution's academic programs are appropriate to its students.

As the primary clients and a fundamental source of income for most colleges and universities, students are a major influence on academic program offerings. To comprehend the extent of student influence, consider the recent decline of teacher education enrollments and the growth of business administration programs. Student characteristics also play a major role in shaping an institution's culture. The college with a student body that is upper-middle class, high ability, and consists mainly of full-time students of traditional college age will be far different from the institution whose students predominately fall into low-income, moderate-ability, part-time categories, with most being over age 25.

The academic affairs committee should require evidence that current and proposed programs coincide with contemporary and predicted student interests and needs (or that the program has other overriding values). Market surveys, applicant demographic data, information on the abilities and

achievements of current students, and trends in program enrollments are useful indicators of student/program agreement.

Responsibility #5: Ensure that the institution assesses the effectiveness of its academic activities.

Many colleges and universities promulgate programs, teach and graduate students, and hire and tenure faculty without systematically evaluating institutional effectiveness. Continuing review is essential to sound planning. If graduates perform poorly in law school or have difficulty finding suitable employment, if faculty falter in the classroom, or if students begin transferring to other colleges in greater than expected numbers, the institution may be suffering from a failure to evaluate and modify, if necessary, its activities.

When considering recommendations concerning budgets, personnel, and programs, the academic affairs committee should require evidence that the proposals are based on an assessment of past performance. To promulgate or alter a program by instinct, without adequate information, is unwise. Proposals for new activities, moreover, should include review mechanisms. Periodic program evaluations, perhaps by external reviewers, should be carried out, reported, and acted upon.

The committee that does not periodically review its own performance will lack the credibility to ask faculty and staff to do so. An evaluation based on a statement of goals and objectives will help the committee identify its strengths and deficiencies.

A variety of methods can be used to assess committee performance. The committee can undertake a self-

assessment, although its members should avoid the temptation to be too polite or complimentary. The committee could issue an annual report and invite comments. A consultant could be retained to conduct confidential interviews with committee and board members and then report, without attribution, the results to the entire committee or to individual members. The consultant could also solicit views from other constituencies, directly observe the committee's work, and review its results. The board chairperson could ask the president and other senior administrators for their candid estimation of the committee's performance. Finally, the committee could use a self-assessment inventory soon to be available through AGB (Richard P. Chait and Associates, forthcoming).

Information for committee decisions

In fulfilling its responsibilities the academic affairs committee needs adequate, timely, and pertinent information. Committee deliberations and recommendations can be no better than the quality of information before the committee. Typically such information derives from a single source—senior administrators, more particularly the chief academic officer and president. When this information, intentionally or unintentionally, is slanted or fails to reflect the range of available options or reasoned views, problems can arise. Further, because nearly all information shared with the committee stems from a reporting system developed for administrators, the depth, breadth, or format of the materials may not suit the committee's needs or purposes.

To reckon with information problems, an academic affairs committee could

undertake "governance programming." This concept, developed by Lawrence Butler of the Cheswick Center in Boston, advocates that a board or committee decide what information it wants to receive, in what form, and how often. It may wish to see, for example, annual staffing plans, student characteristics, placement records, resource shifts, and tenure levels. By establishing a program and a reasonable timetable for management, the committee's information needs are more likely to be satisfied.

As a by-product, a common information base may draw together what could otherwise be a little more than an *ad hoc* group meeting a few times a year. Governance programming ensures timely receipt of appropriate information and reduces special requests for data that can appear to be prejudgments or undue interference in administrative affairs.

Not all committee members may be familiar with all aspects of academic management. Some may understand cost/efficiency measures better than quality indicators; some may understand tenure precepts better than affirmative action provisions. The academic affairs committee might consider background briefings for some members by a subject expert, either for orientation or to obtain an external view of an internal proposal. Trustees unfamiliar with the broader aspects of a topic are likely to be uneasy about discussing the details of particular proposals.

The matter of information sources can be less prickly if the academic affairs committee and the faculty establish open and broad communication channels. The more open the committee can be, the less faculty members will feel compelled to communicate privately with trustees, an awkward situation for all concerned.

Committee members occasionally might seek invitations to visit classes and in turn invite faculty to visit trustee work places. Seminars, luncheons, or dinners where trustees and corporate colleagues meet with a professor having pertinent research interests can be valuable. More formally, there might be parallel academic affairs committees—one composed of trustees, the other of faculty—that meet to explore common concerns. Special joint task forces are another possibility.

Conclusion

Many governing boards have attended to matters of finance and physical plant to the neglect of academic programs. Academic affairs committees have too often been diverted by trivial details while larger issues of academic mission, policy, objectives, and strategy are overlooked or ignored. Such practices endanger institutional vitality and even threaten institutional survival.

By the same token, the realization that academic affairs constitutes the heart of the institution can tempt boards to err in the opposite direction. A board may independently set mission and strategy without consulting the institution's constituents. Trustees should realize that excessive participation can be as harmful as neglect.

A wise academic affairs committee understands the difference between seeing that appropriate actions are taken and taking those actions itself. Through the relentless posing of troublesome questions, the academic affairs committee can force the administration and the faculty to confront fundamental academic challenges. The committee—and ultimately the board—assesses, reviews,

alters, and approves or disapproves responses to those questions.

The academic affairs committee bears a crucial and difficult responsibility. The committee must be tenacious yet restrained, self-directed yet receptive to the contributions of others. The health and vigor of the institution will depend significantly on the committee's ability to strike these delicate balances.

Resources

Academic Strategy, by George Keller (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983). An explication of the ways in which successful academic plans are shaped.

Challenges of Retrenchment, by James R. Mingle and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981). Advice on effective state and institutional responses to revenue and enrollment declines.

The Coming Enrollment Crisis: What Every Trustee Must Know, by David W. Breneman (Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards, 1982). An analysis of predicted college and university enrollments through 1995, directed particularly to trustees.

Handbook of College and University Trusteeship, by Richard T. Ingram and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980). A thorough treatment of governing board roles and responsibilities, including those in the academic sphere. Especially valuable are the chapters by Richard Chait on personnel policies and Martin Meyerson on academic programs.

Improving Academic Management, by Paul Jedamus, Marvin W. Peterson, and

Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980). A compendium of articles defining the nature and importance of institutional research and planning in academic affairs.

Issues in Faculty Personnel Policies, edited by Jon W. Fuller (New Directions for Higher Education, no. 41. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983). A concise examination of personnel policies in a time of declining resources.

Three Thousand Futures, a report of the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980). A rich source of information on the scope of the economic and demographic problems likely to face American colleges and universities through the end of the century.

The Role of Trustees in Academic Affairs, by Richard P. Chait and Associates (Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards, 1984, forthcoming). Reports of results on a two-year national study of governing board involvement in academic affairs, and provides a self-assessment inventory for use by academic affairs committees.

AGB Standing Committee Series

This is the second in a series of publications on the key standing committees of the board of trustees. These concise, pocket-size publications are designed to provide important information on committee issues and operations for every member of the board. Other titles published or planned are:

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